

McBride effort lacks originality

BY BEN YARNELL
Staff Reporter

People always will have certain albums they love to break out when the holiday season begins. It's almost as much of a tradition as putting up the lights and hoping for the first snow of the year.

Martina McBride's new CD, "White Christmas," takes its own shot this year to try and fill that coveted spot in homes across the country.

One of the nice things about this album is the artist. McBride has proven she is a quality vocalist, with four Country Music Association "Female Vocalist of the Year" awards in the decade. The quality of her vocals doesn't even need to be questioned.

But this album enters a whole different field than McBride is accustomed to. Let's face it. Holiday music is a totally different realm than anything else. It is an annual rehashing of the exact same songs, with very few exceptions.

Therein lies the first problem with this endeavor. There isn't a single original song in the bunch. Every last one has been done at least a dozen times by everyone and their brother.

When it comes to holiday music, most artists will, at the very least, have one original song. Then, if that becomes a hit, everybody after them can start covering that song too. It might be a vicious cycle, but the fact that McBride doesn't feed into it still is highly disappointing.

When it comes to songs she actually does have on the slate, it is very hit and miss. Some of



Music Review

"White Christmas"

Martina McBride

Label: RCA

Released: Oct. 2, 2007

Rating



these songs work very well, as with "The Christmas Song" (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire). Here, McBride does two things very right. She sticks very close to Nat King Cole's version, who did it first and did it best. She also lets her country roots show more,

accenting the acoustic and bass guitars.

The fact of the matter is, every time she does stick to the old ways, she comes out for the better, as is the case with "Silver Bells," "Do You Hear What I Hear" and a few other tracks.

But, there are tracks that will seriously make you cringe. The arrangement of "Jingle Bells" is appalling. The song heavily features stringed instruments, but it almost seems as if the violinists had started practicing only a day before.

Then, there is the duet of the album, a version of "Baby, It's Cold Outside" with the late Dean Martin alongside. The trouble with this song is that McBride is singing with an older recording. This sort of post-humous work hardly ever succeeds, and it definitely doesn't here. Now, this is not a shot at the former titan of crooners. McBride's voice is just a very stark and clashing contrast to the recording. One can only hope that had Dino been alive to tweak his performance accordingly, it would have turned out better.

Another way McBride tries to go old school is with the back-up vocals. Back in the days of Bing Crosby and the like, back-up vocals were not just that. Often, these singers would get their own verses, probably stemming from the fact that all of their songs already were sung in large groups, be it in churches or out caroling.

McBride definitely takes a page from this book. But rather than using a choral sound, the back-ups all sound like they are clamoring for a recording deal of their own. It just doesn't work.

Here's my suggestion: Don't go out to buy this CD. It has a few good tracks on it, and those are really all you need for Christmas. Rather, hit up iTunes and figure out which are the good ones, and then buy only them. No need to deprive an old classic of its spot on the shelf for this new wannabe.

Nine other 2007 Christmas albums to check out:

1. Josh Groban "Noel"
2. Various Artists "A Disney Channel Holiday"
3. Relient K "Let It Snow Baby...Let It Reindeer"
4. Patti LaBelle "Miss Patti's Christmas"
5. Jars of Clay "Christmas Songs"
6. The Smithereens "Christmas With the Smithereens"
7. Over the Rhine "Snow Angels"
8. Rick Springfield "Christmas With You"
9. Darlene Love "It's Christmas, Of Course"

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Mannheim steamrolls Christmas spirit, leaving album flat, sterile

BY JONATHAN STUTTE
Reviewer

Maybe it's because they've been doing it for 23 years. Or maybe it's because "Christmas Song" is Mannheim Steamroller's 28th album and 10th Christmas compilation. After so many albums dedicated to a single season, "Christmas Song" proves that Mannheim Steamroller has nothing left to say about Christmas.

Mannheim Steamroller is the moniker of Chip Davis, the composer for the neo-classical new-age band. Davis began the holiday trend back in 1984 with the appropriately-titled "Christmas 1984." This debut Christmas album (Davis had released five Steamroller albums previous to it) featured the band's enthusiastic and now classic rendition of "Deck the Halls." The sound of the album was easy-going and breezy, with every instrument sounding like it was floating in the brisk Christmas air of the 1980s.

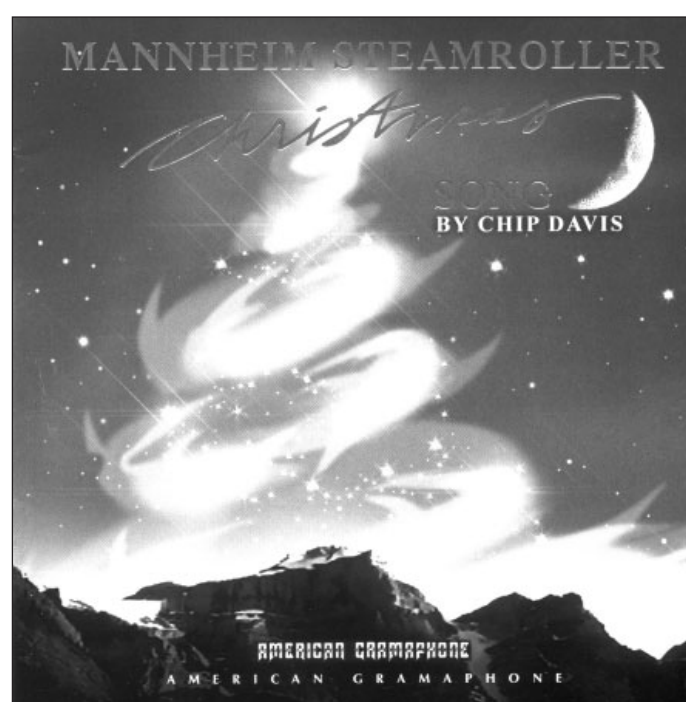
Unfortunately, their 10th Christmas album sounds no different. The production appeals to people who favor smooth jazz and distilled music. The drums sound like someone is hitting an electronic drum pad from the new

Rock Band video game, the classical guitar sounds like it's being filtered through cotton candy and the flutes belong on a porno soundtrack. The production is so clean and gauzy that it makes the music sterile and incapable of holding life.

Mannheim Steamroller aims the opening track "Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow" at malls and department stores so that it can be lost in the hustle

and bustle of shoppers who apparently don't want to hear anything more than a maudlin reinterpretation of a holiday jingle that sounds like a Casio keyboard preset rhythm track. Johnny Mathis turns the following schmaltz, aptly named "The Christmas Song," into a boring trod through Christmas clichés and references.

"Santa Claus is Coming to Town" scores points for being able to outdo the first track in sounding more like it was composed entirely of keyboard presets. Every variable for goofy, comical and squelchy sounds is tested in the familiar refrain for "Santa Claus," making it a laughable yet endearing should-be addition to a toddler's Christmas album. "Masters in This Hall" is a mock Middle English court tune that could be mistaken



Music Review

"Christmas Song"

Mannheim Steamroller

Label: American Gramophone

Released: Oct. 9, 2007

Rating



for a Christmas song if played at the right time of the year. The horns in the song sound suspiciously like they're being played from a synthesizer.

The production eerily suits "Above the Northern Lights," lending the song an almost atmospheric quality that escapes every other song on the album. The vocals, turned in by Gene Nery, are confident

and full of mystery. He sounds as though he's trying to seduce someone into going somewhere they might actually want to go. Unfortunately, the rest of the album doesn't want to cooperate with this vision. Some of it is sappy, and some of it is downright corny in its approach to Christmas music that's been around for who-knows-how-long.